

DEALING WITH SEXUAL IMMORALITY IN GOD'S HOUSE

Today's Text: 1 Cor. 5:1-13

Extracts:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles- that a man has his father's wife!... I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner- not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore, put away from yourselves the evil person [1 Cor. 5: 1, 9-13]

Bishop Chibuike Nwabueze is the Chairman of All Bishops, a Pentecostal assembly in the oil-rich south-eastern Rivers State of Nigeria.¹ Recently, he was arrested and paraded before newsmen by the State Police Command for allegedly raping a 15-year old girl. She even got pregnant but procured an abortion allegedly paid for by the said cleric. Bishop Nwabueze owned up for the crime but claimed that he had been set up by a rival pastor contesting for a church post with him. He had been invited to preach in his church. After the service, the said rival asked him to pray for the said girl in his office. Soon after he had prayed for her, the girl allegedly removed her clothes and before he could say, "blood of Jesus," he found himself all over her!

Our interest in this story is not so much the clergyman's attempt to shift blame but what it represents- growing sexual immorality in God's house. No matter the denomination- large or small, old or new, orthodox or Pentecostal- there is widespread sexual immorality, such as fornication, adultery and child molestation. Painfully, the practice is not new. In this week's Bible verses, Paul deprecated sexual immorality in the Corinthian church. He had strong words for the church and those who practised sexual immorality and other sins there. There is something in it for our modern churches. Read on!

¹ Based on Jimitota Onoyume, "Police parade Bishop Nwabueze over alleged rape, *Vanguard*, Wed., July 03, 2013; <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/07/police-parade-bishop-nwabueze-over-alleged-rape/>

1. Background: Sexual immorality in the body of Christ

The typical impression that most of us have of a church is that it is a place that people come to at agreed times to worship God, no matter how they define Him. Since they perceive the place as holy, they tend to treat it with reverence.

Worshippers are expected to be well behaved and conduct themselves in the fear of the Lord. The Psalmist writes, “One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple” [Ps. 27: 4]. Elsewhere, the Psalmist also says, “I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; *in fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple*” [Ps. 5: 7]. Habakkuk the prophet adds, “*The LORD is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him*” [Hab. 2: 20]. Even our usually restrained Lord, Jesus Christ, was so upset to see the temple in Jerusalem being turned into a market that He made a whip of cords and drove out money changers and the merchants who sold worship items, saying, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves’” [Matt. 21: 12-13].

Like every other human organisation, however, the church has not been spared the same ills that plague the wider society. Hypocrisy now wears long robes! Members kill one another with sharp piercing tongues of gossip. But such things pale into insignificance compared to sexual immorality that is taking a heavy toll on many congregations. *We shall define sexual immorality as any sexual relationship outside of that between a man and his wife* [1 Cor. 7: 2; Heb. 13: 4]. It can take the following forms, all of which are abominable before God:

- With self, such as *masturbation* or onanism [Gen. 38: 8-10]
- With objects or pictures/films, such as *pornography*
- With animals (*bestiality*) [Ex. 22:19; Lev. 18: 23]
- With the underage (*pedophilia*)
- With family or close kin (*incest*) [Lev. 18:6-18]
- With same sex (*homosexuality or lesbianism*) [Lev. 18: 22; Rom. 1: 26-27]
- With other than your own spouse (*fornication or adultery*) [1 Cor. 7: 2]
- In your thought (*adultery of the heart*) [Matt. 5: 27-28]

Clearly, most of us are guilty of sexual immorality, going by that list “for whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” [Jam. 2: 10]. Unlike animals which mate only when they are on heat and specifically for procreation, *humans make love more for recreation than for procreation*; and they are on heat all the time! So, sex-related sins pose the most challenge to an average congregation. In an attempt by large membership-seeking pastors to make their churches more user-friendly than God-fearing, *the bars of morality have been so lowered as to make the word of God in the Bible outdated rather than timeless*. But is all hope lost?

That is where Paul's First Letter to the church at Corinth becomes very helpful. What did he find worshippers doing there that he had to address? Why did he condemn it? Here are some of the details that we need to focus on:

a) *Sexual immorality was there*

Paul wrote, "It is **actually reported** that there is sexual immorality among you, and **such immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles**- that a man has his father's wife!" [1 Cor. 5: 1].

Sexual immorality in that congregation was not a rumour; it was a fact. In other words, it happened; it was seen or heard and talked about. That was why it was "actually reported." It was so bad that it was not even the type that could be mentioned among the Gentiles (i.e., unbelievers). One example was that of a man who had his father's wife. That was his step-mother! There were fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals and sodomites there [1 Cor. 6: 9].

Is your church different? Tongues are wagging. The priest or pastor or shepherd (whatever name they call him) is allegedly sleeping with multiple women in the congregation, some of whom are members' wives. Some members are cohabiting and they are not properly married. In one church that I am familiar with, they have frequent naming ceremonies but hardly any weddings. Whose babies are they naming? In another large congregation, altar boys are being violated by identifiable priests and many people know about it. Elsewhere, prophets who are supposedly praying for barren women are sleeping with them to "help" their prayers!

b) *It defiled the church*

Paul wrote, "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven" [1 Cor. 5: 6-7]. Leaven is a rising agent used to make dough rise. A good example is yeast, used in bakeries. All you need to make a huge lump rise is to add a little leaven. In like manner, once you tolerate or cover up sexual immorality in a church, the whole place can soon be defiled.

You will recall that, when Balak, king of the Moabites invited a diviner, Balaam, to curse the children of Israel on their way from Egypt, he could not do it because God prevented him. He could not curse whom God had blessed [Num. 23: 8]. They were "the congregation in the wilderness" [Acts 7: 38]. But when they arrived in Moab, Balaam taught Balk how to use sexual immorality and idolatry to leaven that congregation [Rev. 2: 14]. We are told, "the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab." Their acts angered God who sent a plague among them that killed

twenty-four thousand people [Num. 25: 1-9]. Indeed, a little leaven leavens the whole dough!

c) *Yet, they did not seem to want to do something about it*

In spite of the dangers that sin in general and sexual immorality in particular posed to the house of God, the church at Corinth did not seem to want to do something about it. Paul wrote, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together... deliver such a one [who had taken his father’s wife] to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. Your glorying is not good” [1 Cor. 5: 4-6].

One reason most people do not want to do something is not to look judgmental; after all, who is clean to cast the first stone? Another reason could be fear or favouritism, such as Eli the priest turning a blind eye to the sexual immorality of his two sons that “lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting” [1 Sam. 2: 22]. But Paul told the Corinthian church that, while *believers had* no reason to judge all sexually immoral people of the world, they had *a moral responsibility to God to judge those within their congregation*. He concluded, “Those who are outside God judges. Therefore, put away from yourselves the evil person” [vv. 9-13].

From the foregoing, it is clear why sexual immorality is a serious sin among believers. In Paul’s words, the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord. *If your body belongs to Christ, can you join it to the body of somebody who is not your spouse and claim to be “two in one flesh”?* So, Paul concluded, “Flee sexual immorality. *Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body [which] is the temple of the Holy Spirit*” [1 Cor. 6: 13-19]. So, we need to deal with the problem before it deals with us.

2. Lessons for all modern believers

Here are some important issues we must understand if we want to be able to deal with sexual immorality in God’s house:

a) *Satan thrives most in God’s house!*

We sometimes make the naïve assumption that God’s house is full of angels. My neighbour used to think so until they stole his purse (containing cash and valuable documents) when he left it by his Bible to go and take Holy Communion! The truth is that Satan actually thrives most in God’s house. People in brothels are already his disciples. The only people who pretend to denounce or renounce him are gathered in God’s

house. So, it is an easy target to strike once and get a rich harvest! ***Satan thrives most in God's house, and the earlier you realize it, the better prepared you are.***

You will recall what happened when Jesus first began His public ministry after His forty days and night in the wilderness where He had defeated Satan. As soon as He entered a synagogue in Capernaum, a man who had a demonic spirit cried out, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are- the Holy One of God!" Everywhere else in other Galilean cities, it was the same experience- the demons recognised Him as "the Christ, the Son of God!" [Lk 4: 31-41]. Regular people, on the other hand, saw Jesus simply as the carpenter's son that deserved to be thrown down the cliff [vv. 20-30]!

So, do not be deceived. ***Those "men of God" putting their hands on your head to pray for you or cast out demons may be false apostles and deceitful workers that are actually agents of Satan, posing as angels of light and ministers of righteousness [2 Cor. 11: 13-15]. Therefore, you must always be in Spirit so that His Spirit of discernment can serve as radar to keep you alert and on course at all times.*** For that to happen, your body must remain sanctified as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

b) *You cannot fight sexual immorality in flesh!*

You cannot fight sexual immorality with will power but with the power of God for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this age, and spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, ***you must put on the whole armour of God, praying always and watchfully with patience so as to keep winning victories when temptation comes [Eph. 6: 11-18].***

God Himself called David the man after His own heart [1 Sam. 13: 14]. Yet, when he saw a naked woman who was not his wife, he fell for the temptation and had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his officers. We know the terrible consequences that followed. The sword never departed from his house thereafter [2 Sam.: Chaps. 11-13]. Compare that with Joseph who was tempted on many occasions by Potiphar's wife to sleep with her but he refused, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" [Gen. 39: 1-12]. He suffered thereafter but his faithfulness to his God was what propelled him to his elevation as governor of Egypt some years later. You too can do it!

c) *And you cannot sweep it under your church carpet either!*

Churches and worshippers worry more about their public image than their standing with God. So, each time something that gives a bad name to the congregation or church is exposed, they quickly sweep it under the carpet-to let sleeping dogs lie. Unfortunately, our sins will surely find us out [Num. 32: 23]! Hungry dogs cannot lie down peacefully. The carpet is now swollen and stinking. There can be no peace without equity and justice, and repentance. ***God as the judge does not need human witnesses to prove your guilt beyond reasonable doubt! Therefore, the best thing to do is to recognise that there is a moral issue that needs prompt and decisive action.*** Otherwise, it may be too late when the whole dough is leavened by that tiny lump of leaven that was neglected a few years ago. Ask churches in Europe and America that have recently been forced to cough up huge sums of money to pay for damages arising from court judgments.

In sum, it is clear that sexual immorality is a serious matter, especially in God's house. ***Adultery is not a thriller but a killer!***² Therefore, like Job, you should be able to say resolutely, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?" [Job 31: 1]. ***Put away from among you those who call themselves brothers and sisters but give Satan and the world occasions to laugh at your hypocrisy. That is Paul's message to the modern church.***

3. Conclusion: The choice is yours!

Sexual immorality, like every other sin, is a matter of life and death. We are not talking about sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS. Those are small things compared to eternity in hell. ***However, it is never too late to repent. God is faithful. If you confess your sins, He is faithful and just to forgive you your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness [1 Jn 1: 6-9].*** Jesus Christ is your Advocate before His Father and He has already paid the price for you with His own blood on the cross [1 Jn 2: 1].

So the choice is yours. It is never too late to change because God does not use a wrist watch! Any time you come to Him is early morning before Him. ***Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Use it to glorify God. God is Spirit and those who come to His holy house must worship Him in spirit and in truth!*** The choice is yours.

² "Adultery is a killer not a thriller!" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 5 No. 33: 21 Nov. 2004; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_5/PDFs/33_Adulteryisakillernotathriller.pdf